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## **Philippines: Justice still not served one year after massacre**

Amnesty International today called on the Philippine authorities to ensure timely justice for the Maguindanao massacre, and to abolish the private armies that continue to operate one year after the killings.

On 23 November 2009, at least 57 people were abducted and brutally killed and their bodies dumped in a mass grave on a hillside above the town of Ampatuan in the southern Philippine province of Maguindanao. Those killed included 32 journalists.

“How the Philippine government handles this case will demonstrate how serious President Aquino is about reining in private armies and curbing human rights violations,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific Programme Director.

“The government has to show that the Philippines has the ability and will to deal fairly but resolutely with a massacre that constituted the worst ever attack on journalists anywhere in the world.”

Those killed had been travelling in a convoy to witness the filing of candidacy papers for a local politician when they were stopped by a group of about 100 armed men. The ambush was motivated by a long-standing political feud between members of the group and the Ampatuan clan.

Leading members of the powerful local Ampatuan clan have since been charged in connection with the killings, however the trials have been marked by delays and no prosecutions have been concluded.

Former Maguindanao governor Andal Ampatuan Sr., and his sons Andal Ampatuan Jr. and Zaldy Amapatuan are on trial for the killings. Of the other nearly 200 people implicated in the killings, news sources report that 82 have been detained, and another 114, including private militia members, clan members and police and government soldiers, remain at large.

The Maguindano trials have been marked by delays and judicial wrangling. Earlier this month Justice Secretary Leila de Lima said she would accelerate the proceedings, but admitted that the trials could take six more years.

One year after the massacre, other private armies continue to operate in the Philippines under Executive Order 546, which former President Gloria Arroyo signed and implemented in 2006. This order effectively authorizes private armies by allowing the Philippine National Police to deputize militias and Civilian Volunteer Organizations (CVOs) as “force multipliers”.

Many members of Governor Andal Ampatuan’s private army are part of CVOs, which the government had established and armed. The system of authorization for armed groups which are then used as private armies

remains intact.

“If President Aquino is serious about ending the violence associated with private armies, he should revoke Executive Order 546 at once,” said Sam Zarifi. “The fact that private armies continue to operate a year after the Maguindanao massacre is an affront to the victims and an invitation to further disasters.”

Note to editors

Amnesty International spokespeople are available for comment.

In Manila, contact Hazel Galang (English and Tagalog) on +63 919 817 8330

In London, contact Sam Zarifi on +44 (0)7904 397 935.